

# What might childhood look like in the future?

A Discussion Guide  
For Exploring Possibilities For Public Policy

Developed by the Interactivity Foundation

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# What Might Childhood Look Like in the Future?



Nearly everyone has concerns when it comes to the future of children, whether or not you are raising a child. You may worry, for instance, that our society has become too fast-paced and stressful for parents to have adequate time to concentrate on raising happy, well-adjusted kids. That said, some citizens wonder whether there is too much focus on idealized approaches to raising children—the assertion being that there are “right” ways for children to eat, sleep, play, and learn and that these standards should be enforced upon all parents.

Instead of letting children explore the world on their own, the 21st-century parent is pressured to constantly shepherd his or her child from one planned activity to the next. The pressure to raise a “genius” and the competition to find and fastidiously develop whatever special talents children might exhibit

can contribute to a climate wherein children are pushed too harshly at a very young age to specialize and excel at a particular sport, musical instrument, or other talent.

Despite many parents’ concentration on identifying and developing their child’s unique talent, schools are trying to level the playing field through standardized testing. In an era in which information is instantly accessible, the focus in schools seems increasingly directed toward assessing students’ mastery over a core set of common skills and knowledge. Meanwhile, team building and interpersonal skills, which are in demand in the 21st-century workplace, are too often overlooked. Collaborative exchanges help young people recognize and challenge biased thinking that is outmoded and even dangerous in our increasingly diverse social landscape. These

# What Might Childhood Look Like in the Future?

exchanges can also help children become more resilient when facing circumstances and interactions in which one does not always get to do things the way one wishes.

One of the deepest concerns for today's families is that both parents either need or want to continue working outside the home while raising young children, which can create a number of challenges. Day care facilities, housekeeping services, and quick and convenient food options have become omnipresent since women began entering the work force en masse over the past two-and-a-half decades. Families in which both parents work—as well as single-parent homes—are, however, particularly overstressed. After a generation marred by divorce and exhaustion, more people seem to be asking if a dual-career family is the best way to go. This discussion guide aspires to create space for citizens to begin asking this question and re-imagining how the future of raising children might look. For many families, there is either a single working parent or an absolute necessity for both parents to work, but increasingly families are re-evaluating work-life balance and the ways in which they can prioritize and manage both.

Despite participants' worries over child predators, many believed that most kids would benefit from more formal and informal mentoring by adults in their communities. Opinion was split as to how much interaction children need with technology, and several participants felt

as though child predators were much more likely to be lurking in cyberspace than in one's neighborhood. In the end, many agreed that it takes a village to raise great kids, but that we need to figure out better ways of promoting a diverse, compassionate, safe, and joyful village while guarding against a competitive and judgmental atmosphere.

**What concerns do you have about the future of childhood?  
List them here.**

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# The Possibilities

## Section I: Parenting Great Kids ..... Pg. 6

Many people would agree that the most significant factor in raising great kids is competent, involved, parenting. Two of the ways in which social policy could impact parenting would be to help people readily find ways to connect with other parents in their communities and to think about and re-evaluate the value of creating more time for the family.

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Children require significant support from their community if they are to fully develop their skills and talents. An organized community that provides opportunities to engage in athletics, art, music, engineering, and other endeavors can best ensure that all children figure out early in their lives their talents and interests. Accessibility to mentors and cutting-edge schools can ensure that they hone and develop those talents.

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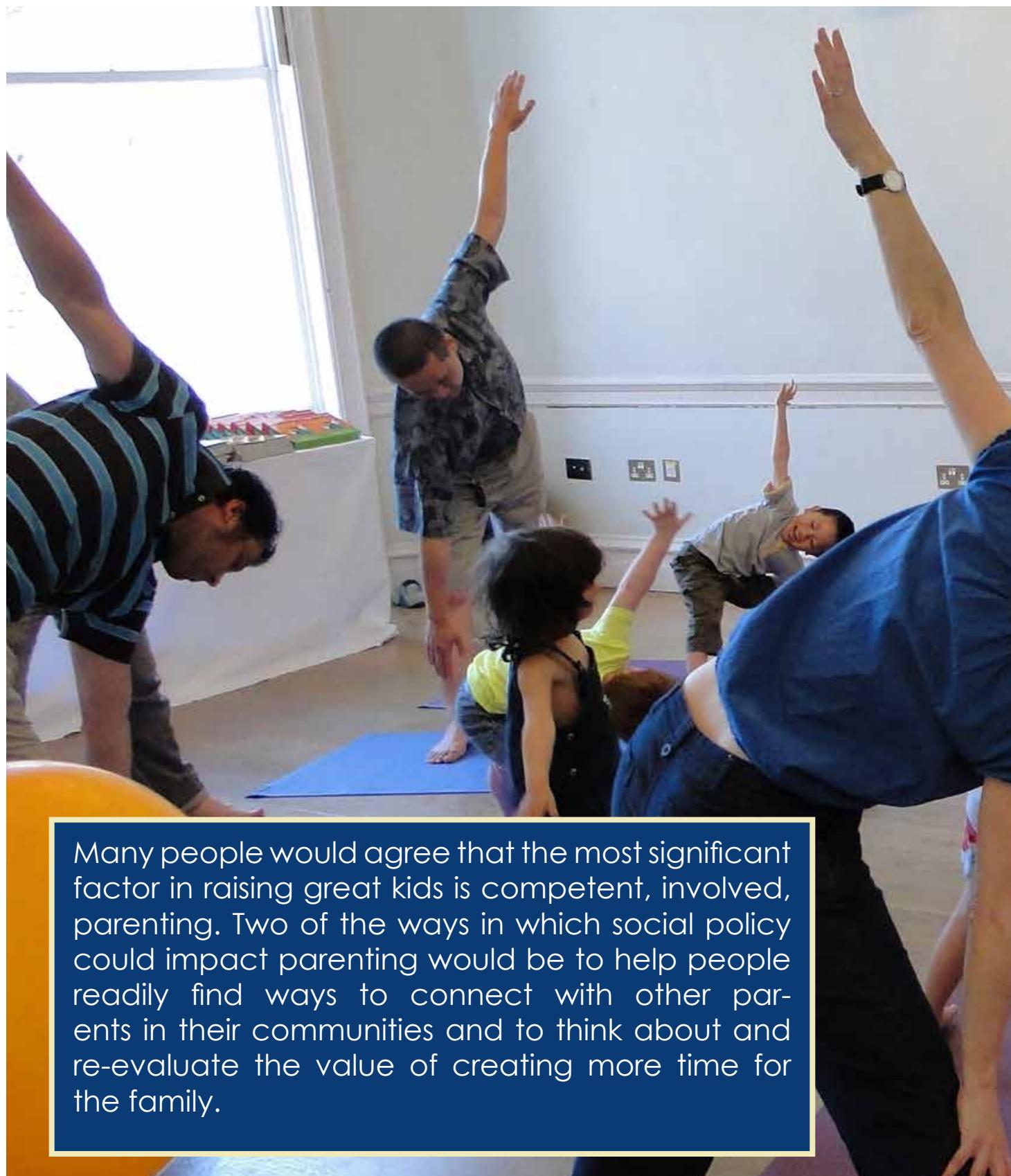
Our country—and the world—is becoming much smaller. As a result, children are being raised in a more diverse and interesting world. Modern media exposes them to a wider range of people, cultures, and ideas, and this can provide a safe means for them to broaden their experiential base. It is important that such depictions are realistic—and that the adults in children's lives avoid handing down perspective-narrowing biases.

Possibility E: Life is Group Work ..... Pg. 28-31

Possibility F: Free Their Minds ..... Pg. 32-35

Possibility	Concerns Addressed	Possible Actions
A. Parent Connect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Parents need more support and guidance that is "real" and not overly idealized.</li> <li>Each child is unique, but children go through phases that pattern behavior. Parents who have "been there" can best guide other parents.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Parents may feel more competent as they develop their own parenting identity.</li> <li>Parents wouldn't feel so alone with the challenges they face.</li> </ul>
B. Re-Evaluate the Dual-Income Family Model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Too many families are overstressed by trying to manage the "work-family balance."</li> <li>It may not be possible to do/have it all while raising happy, well-adjusted kids.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>More companies might begin to offer child care or provide vouchers for child care.</li> <li>Divorce rates may decline.</li> <li>Gender roles will be re-evaluated based upon what works for one's family.</li> </ul>
C. Do You! Help Children Develop Their Unique Talents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Children need to be encouraged to develop their unique talents and to feel good about themselves.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Many children will become more self-confident.</li> <li>Some kids may become too self-absorbed.</li> </ul>
D. It Takes a Village	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Parents cannot be all things to their kids. They need teachers, coaches, clergy, and neighbors to help them guide their children.</li> <li>So many of us worry a great deal about "stranger danger," and this may rob our kids of the external guidance they need.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>More adults will become involved in mentoring—formally or informally—children in their neighborhood and community.</li> <li>More kids will discover and develop a wider range of skills and talents earlier in their lives.</li> </ul>
E. Life is Group Work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Schooling in the 21<sup>st</sup> century needs to incorporate learning life skills—especially the ability for young people to work effectively with others.</li> <li>Our children are not well-prepared to enter the modern work world, which relies much more on collaboration.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Young people will learn more "soft skills," such as how to work well with others, and these will help them immensely in their future work, family, and community lives.</li> <li>The role of teachers will have to change.</li> </ul>
F. Free Their Minds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The modern American child lives in a much more diverse country.</li> <li>Our children will be burdened if they inherit our biases.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Children will become more curious and engaged with a wider variety of cultural groups and peers.</li> <li>The effects of racism may lessen over time.</li> </ul>

## Section I: Parenting Great Kids



Many people would agree that the most significant factor in raising great kids is competent, involved, parenting. Two of the ways in which social policy could impact parenting would be to help people readily find ways to connect with other parents in their communities and to think about and re-evaluate the value of creating more time for the family.



Create opportunities for parents and parenting allies (teachers, neighbors, coaches, pediatricians, aunts, uncles, etc.) to connect with and mentor one another.



Too often, new parents feel overwhelmed by the demands of their infant child and also by the pressure to feel like they're "doing everything right." So much of the parenting advice one gets from websites, blogs, in magazines, and even from pediatricians and grandparents can feel stifling. Everyone is an expert. We hear that "the breast is best" or that "the MMR vaccine gave my child autism" or that a good mom would "make the time" to prepare organic, homemade food for her children. The sense of overwhelm can be especially strong when one is faced with a new baby or a first child, who is unrelenting in its demands. This is likely true regardless of socioeconomic status, race, gender, or age. The process of bonding is not always as immediate, and taking a child

and all of his or her "gear" out can be daunting. Isolation can quickly overwhelm, creating a post-partum haze that can overtake a new mom or dad—whether biological or adoptive.

### What's Behind It?

All of the advice can make for a serious assault on new parents' confidence as they take on what is already a daunting role. Many people put off parenting until they are well into their twenties, thirties, or forties. To suddenly be faced with a completely new role and a huge learning curve is overwhelming enough without the constant peanut gallery one encounters when facing the world with a young child in tow. Suddenly, the new parent starts to second-guess him or herself.

Dads who decide to take an active role in parenting their children or even decide to be the primary at-home parent can attract comments and even ridicule in some communities. Even if dad is not the primary caretaker, he might still get questioned when assuming an active parenting role. Alas, times are changing faster than many people's attitudes, and we are increasingly seeing more families with a range of parenting arrangements. But where can they go for timely and useful guidance from peers who really "get it"—who truly understand the new parent's life and demands?

## How might this possibility be implemented?

How can we create opportunities in our communities for new (and not-so-new) parents to meet other parents with children in similar stages of development so they can share experiences, insights, and resources in a collaborative and collegial fashion? Often, people turn to online resources to seek the advice of other parents because such forums are readily available at two o'clock in the morning, when some calamitous emergency inevitably arises. Unfortunately, though, most of these forums do not attract a group of "regulars," and so they can lack the collegiality that might make them more effective. When you are giving advice to a person you don't really know, it's easy to sound dismissive or overly confident. Still, technology can help create opportunities for parents to mentor one another—or even to find one another—via a parenting group that meets at a local mall or library. It might be more challenging to assist people in meeting one another in rural areas, where Internet access might be sparse.



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### Discussion Questions:

1. What types of parents might be most vulnerable (for example, first-time parents, teen mothers and fathers, single parents, grandparents raising grandchildren)? Is it useful for certain types of parents to connect, i.e., dads with other dads, grandparents raising grandkids?
2. How could we more effectively connect parents with resources such as other parents, neighbors, relatives, teachers, doctors, and mentors in the community?
3. How can we bring together parents and experts (such as pediatricians and teachers) in a way that empowers rather than intimidates parents?



### Challenges to Implementing This Possibility Include:

- a. Some parents might feel self-conscious about discussing their challenges and anxieties.
  - b. Parents in non-traditional families might not feel welcome in discussion communities. Alternatively, discussion forums might become "segregated" by family type, race, ethnicity, etc. Different immigrant groups would, for instance, likely have varying approaches to child rearing.
  - c. Who would set the agenda or curriculum for these forums? There could be a tendency for popular opinion or practice to dominate. Facilitators could help ensure that balanced, diverse views are explored.
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## Potential Consequences

1. Parents may feel more competent as they develop their own parenting identity.
2. Parents wouldn't feel so alone with the challenges they face with their kids and their families.
3. These sorts of exchanges would make parents feel reassured when they don't have all the answers about every phase of their child's life.
4. Funding these sorts of resources could prove problematic.
5. Informational websites could become a place for corporate and political promotion and influence.
6. Significant hostilities can develop among people with different views on parenting, such as approaches to discipline, which is why a trained facilitator could be helpful in moderating these sorts of discussions.

## Further Resources

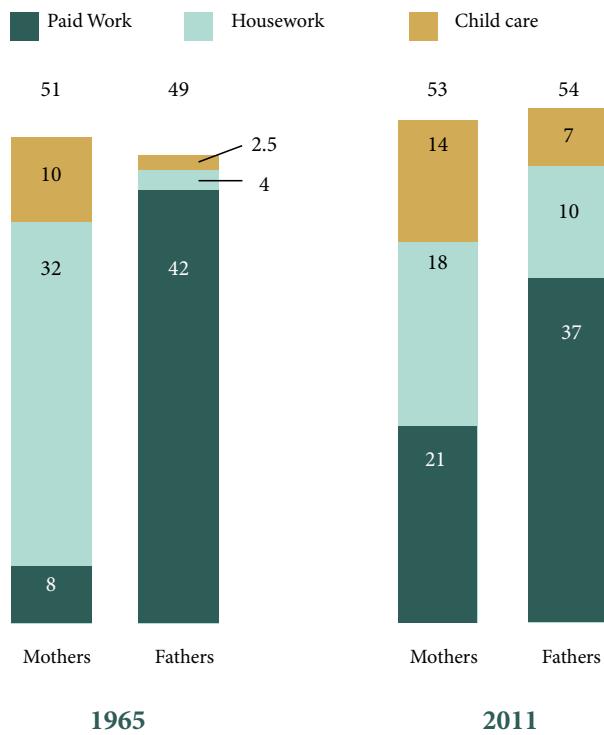
- a. "Parenting Allies": <https://www.facebook.com/parentingallies>
  - b. Berkeley Parents Network: <http://parents.berkeley.edu>
  - c. The website <http://www.uptoparents.org>, which is recommended and sometimes court-ordered as a co-parenting tool for divorcing parents or for parents who were never married and are involved in custody disputes. The website is user-friendly and emphasizes the importance of considering the child's point of view and best interests in all matters, as well as communication between parents.
  - d. Ann Fessler: *The Girls Who Went Away: The Hidden History of Women Who Surrendered Children for Adoption in the Decades Before Roe v. Wade*.
  - e. The IF Discussion Guidebook: *The Future of the Family*
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# Possibility B Re-Evaluate The Dual-Income Family Model

**Slow Down And Make Time To Nurture Kids And Families, Because Happy, Healthy, Well-Adjusted Kids Are A Great Investment.**

## Moms and Dads, 1965-2011: Roles Coverge, but Gaps Remain

*Average number of hours per week spent on...*



Note: Based on adults ages 18-64 with own child(ren) under age 18 living in the household. Total figures (at the top of the bar) may not add to component parts due to rounding.

Sources: 1965 data from Table 5A.1-2 in Bianchi, et al. (2006). 2011 data from Pew Research analysis of the American Time Use Survey.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

What would the United States look like if families were able to invest more of their time in child rearing? Effective parenting requires significant time and energy. Some people fear that insufficient focus on nurturing children and families has contributed to some of the problems the United States is experiencing with regard to violence, underperforming education systems, and overstressed families. How would the future of childhood change if there was a national initiative to put families first?

Government initiatives could encourage employers to offer more flexible work hours, telecommuting opportunities, job sharing options, and even shorter workweeks. An increase in the minimum wage could help some parents by allowing them to live off of the income of one rather than two or three jobs. Moreover, affordable day care could be offered to all families. Many families spend as much or more than the cost of their monthly mortgage payment on child care each month, and social programs can only do so much. This possibility challenges us to examine how we are spending our time—both in paid work and as it is directed toward raising our families.

## What's Behind It?

According to the Pew Research Center, 56% of working mothers and 50% of working fathers say it's very or somewhat difficult for them to balance work and family. In the average dual-income household, each parent works outside of the home for at least 40 hours a week. During the remaining hours of the week, they have to manage their home, plan meals, shop for clothes, food, and other essentials, and parent their children.

What is surprising, though, is that while fathers are contributing much more to child care and housework, mothers report that they are actually doing much more child care than they were nearly 50 years ago—all while working longer hours. Household tasks such as cooking and cleaning are increasingly being done by hired help, but parents report devoting significant time to child care, very possibly because so much of their children's time is directed toward scheduled activities rather than free play. Modern parents strive every day to achieve an ever-elusive work-life balance, but there remains an ever-present time deficiency. It may be that our achievement-driven society is robbing us at both ends: Parents try to balance job(s) and careers while trying valiantly to discover and nurture every talent or interest their child might have. For families with multiple children, this creates a frenetic pace as parents rush home from work to pick up kids and take them to various after-school activities and sporting events.

## How might this possibility be implemented?

Could Americans live on less money with the goal of investing more time and resources into our children? Could kids achieve excellence without pursuing five different extra-curricular activities each season? The costs associated with raising a child have risen dramatically over the last several decades. Child care and education comprise a large percentage of those costs. The U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates that it will cost an average of \$235,000 to raise a child born in 2011 for 17 years. Notably, all of those planned enrichment activities for children have become big business and add significantly to the family budget.

Support networks and education could be provided to parents to help them better balance home and family with work—and maybe even to learn “greener,” cheaper ways of living, such as growing a garden and cooking more at home. The popularity of television shows like *The Chew*, which present easy home-cooked meals, provide tips on doing more cooking at home, and creating crafts that enhance one's home, suggests a revitalization of interest in homemaking and homecooking in the United States. A marketing initiative to promote the benefits of slowing down and re-evaluating family priorities could help. Such programs have changed our views on other social issues, such as breastfeeding and recycling.

## How might this possibility be implemented?

Employers could develop more methods for parents to telecommute or work from home. Employment laws could be changed so that parents, especially women, do not have to give up their careers if they decide to stay home with their child for a period of time—perhaps by expanding existing programs such as the Family and Medical Leave Act. We could even develop an at-home-parent subsidy or tax credit for parents who stay home with their child. This is based on the idea of fairness—parents who send their children to day care are entitled to a tax credit; should parents who care for their children in their own homes also qualify for such credits?



### Discussion Questions:

1. In what ways might a dual-income model lead to exhaustion, stress, dysfunction, divorce, and maladjusted children? Or, is the reverse true? Do families with a stay-at-home parent really produce happier, healthier, well-adjusted children? What are some of the defining elements that children receive when there is a stay-at-home parent? When both parents work?
  2. Should we socially, governmentally, and even environmentally discourage the dual-income model and instead promote the stay-at-home parent model? Why or why not? What about single parents?
  3. If we agree that the stay-at-home parenting model is best for children, how do we socially and governmentally promote this? Should we encourage this model at least until the youngest child in a home starts kindergarten?
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## Challenges to Implementing this Possibility Include:

- a. Since the global recession began in 2007, families have struggled with widespread unemployment and rising healthcare costs. Many parents must work two or even three jobs just to keep a roof over the family's head and food on the table.
- b. Corporations have fought an increase in the minimum wage since its inception. Parents who earn near or at a minimum wage often qualify for housing and child care subsidies, which may mean that the U.S. tax payer is subsidizing a minimum wage that may be too minimal.
- c. Many individuals derive immense satisfaction from a career—and from contributing financially to the family. They could feel frustrated if they stopped doing such work.
- d. Having one parent work less so as to be home with the kids more could be viewed as a step backward for gender equality if it were mostly women who cut back on work hours or stopped working entirely.

## Potential Consequences

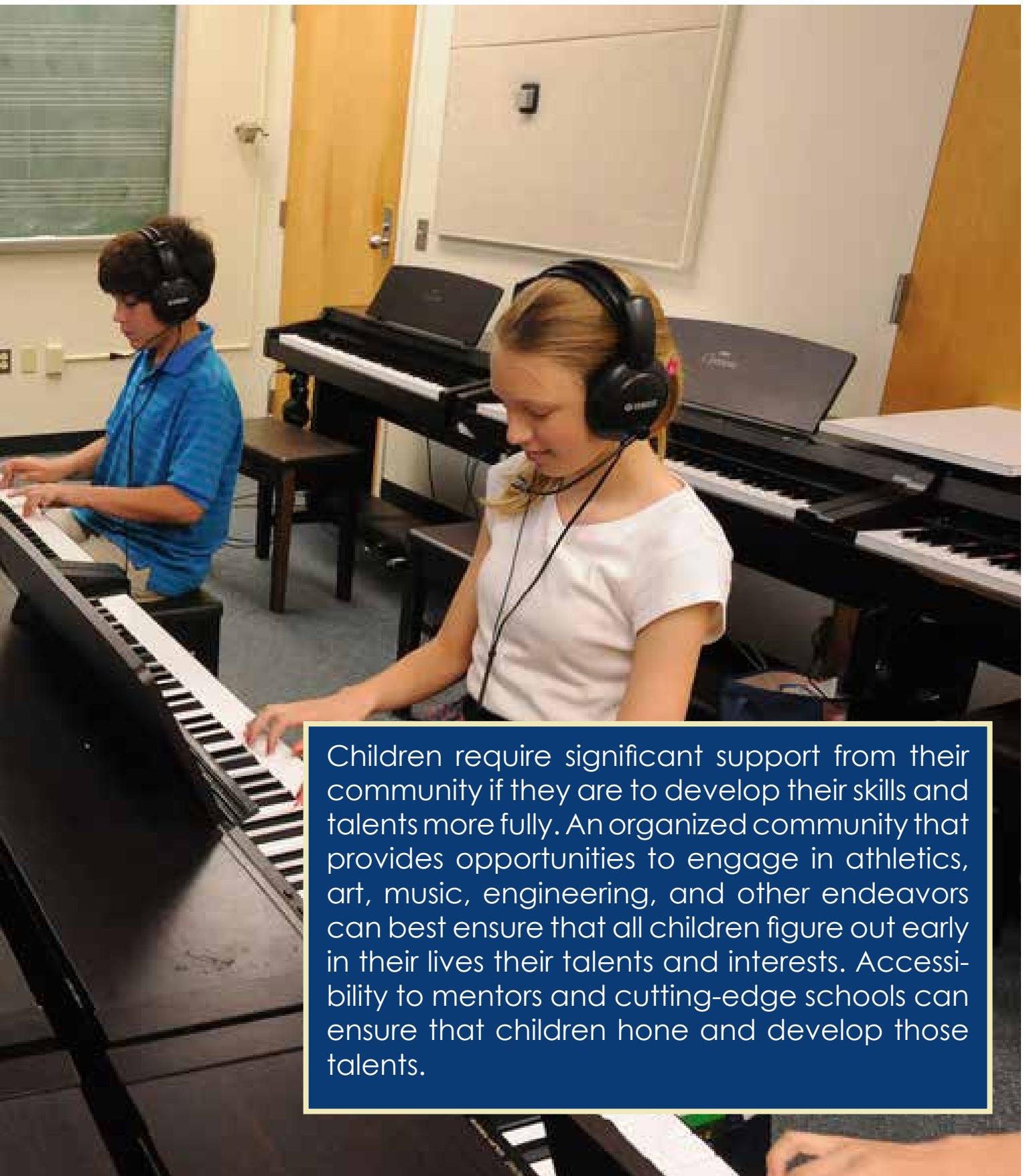
- 1. More companies might begin to offer child care or provide vouchers for child care.
- 2. Parents could be more involved in schools. Increased involvement might lead to better student performance and fewer behavioral issues in the classroom.
- 3. Children may feel supported and secure, although older children may feel overmonitored and/or overly managed.
- 4. More families might stay intact if the work-life balance could be better sustained. Parents would have more time to devote to their children and to each other. Conversely, there could be relationship strife based upon who will sacrifice their income and professional development to stay home with the kids.
- 5. Gender norms could be further examined as families seek to find the optimal division of labor regardless of sex.

## Further Resources

- a. "The Cost of Raising Children": <http://www.usatoday.com/story/money/personalfinance/2012/12/23/cost-raising-kids/1788415/>
- b. "Modern Parenthood": <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2013/03/14/modern-parenthood-roles-of-moms-and-dads-converge-as-they-balance-work-and-family/>
- c. "Why Gender Equality Stalled": [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/17/opinion/sunday/why-gender-equality-stalled.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/17/opinion/sunday/why-gender-equality-stalled.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0)

## Section II: Community Support





Children require significant support from their community if they are to develop their skills and talents more fully. An organized community that provides opportunities to engage in athletics, art, music, engineering, and other endeavors can best ensure that all children figure out early in their lives their talents and interests. Accessibility to mentors and cutting-edge schools can ensure that children hone and develop those talents.

## Put More Resources Into Helping Children Identify And Develop Their Unique Talents.

Everyone is good at something. As a society, we need to do more to encourage and develop each child's individual interests and abilities so that every child can develop a healthy sense of self-esteem. Having a sense of esteem and purpose is one of the best means of ensuring that a child will grow up to feel worthwhile and be capable of contributing meaningfully to society. We lose tremendous social resources when we allow children to be bullied and devalued by parents, teachers, peers, ideologies and media images, etc. It's not about everyone getting a trophy—it's about everyone knowing that they have unique and valuable talents to contribute to this world.

For many children, their special talent may not be something that's well-recognized. A child may have excellent mechanical aptitude or be great at reading maps or planning outings. By helping to identify and nurture whatever those talents are, we do a great deal to ensure that the child will grow up optimistic and confident.



Some people may feel that children already have too much self-esteem—an over-inflated sense of self driven by "helicopter" parents who hover over their children, trying to direct and promote them. But a parent pushing their children to excel at something is not the same as a parent watching for aptitudes and finding opportunities for their child to explore an interest or potential talent. If the child does not feel joy in pursuing and developing a skill that activity will not likely translate into an improved self-esteem.

## What's Behind It?

According to the Self-Esteem Institute, low self-esteem is a thinking disorder in which an individual views himself as inadequate, unacceptable, unworthy, unlovable, and/or incompetent. This corrupted way of thinking permeates every aspect of a child's life and can cause him or her to withdraw from opportunities, settle for less than is deserved, give up dreams, forfeit goals, engage in unhealthy and chaotic relationships, and behave in ways that are self-defeating.

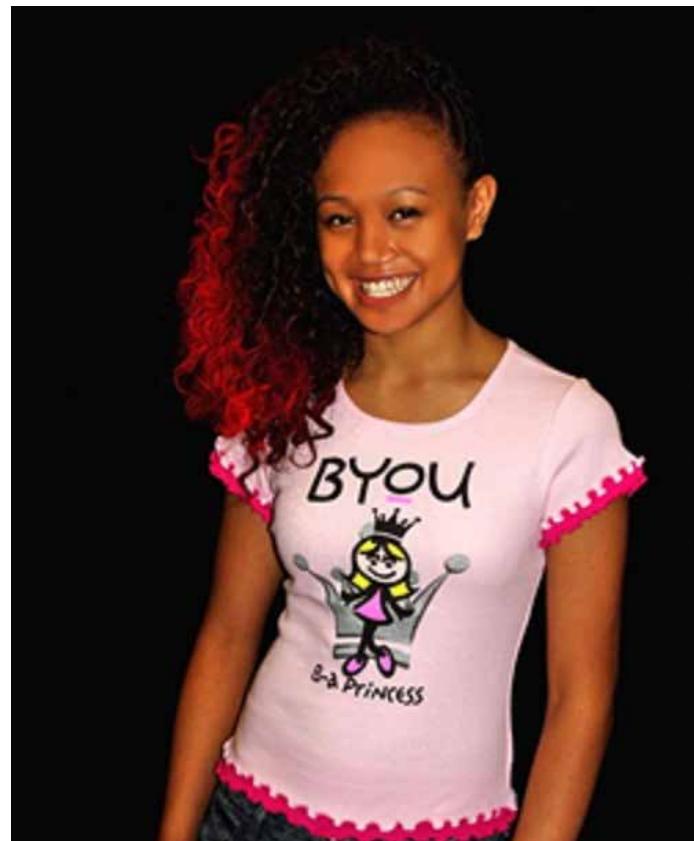
In 2011, Dove released the findings of its largest global study to date on women's relationship with beauty—*The Real Truth About Beauty: Revisited*. The study revealed that six out of 10 girls stop doing what they love just because they feel bad about how they look (or how they perceive they look to others). It is also a well-documented fact that a child's view of him or herself as good at something (drawing, singing, dancing) is never greater than when that child is in preschool and kindergarten.

As a child ages, his or her sense of competence declines, which is natural in some ways. We're not all good at everything. But across all social and economic boundaries, there are countless examples of unrealized potential mitigated by low self-esteem. What would this world look like if our children did not entertain this destructive mindset? What could children achieve if they were exposed to a wide variety of activities so as to discover ones in which they could excel?

## How might this possibility be implemented?

Parents of all income levels could be given more opportunities to enroll their children in sports, music, art, and other activities. Experts in those areas could give parents more feedback about developing their child's talents. Single parents and lower-income families may face special challenges in helping their children develop talents, as extracurricular endeavors can be expensive. There are resources for support, but such resources need to be better promoted and easier to engage and access.

Coaches, teachers, and others who work with children could be given more



guidance about how to provide positive and motivating feedback to the young people they guide. Is it useful for coaches and teachers to be overly critical? Can this be motivating to some children? Athletic competition can support a culture of "winners" and "losers," though increasingly sports programs are encouraging younger players to simply work on learning and enjoying a sport before moving toward more competitive play. Many communities also have recreational leagues alongside competitive opportunities.

We could encourage more advocacy groups, such as "It Gets Better," in which gay, lesbian, and transgender adults provide support to teens and pre-teens who are experiencing bullying due to their sexual orientation or identity. These sorts of resources encourage self-esteem in all young people throughout their childhood and adolescent years.

### Discussion Questions:

1. How can we best help children learn from mistakes and failure?
2. In what ways might this policy run counter to a competitive global economy?
3. How do we help children develop their self-esteem without setting the bar too low?
4. What sorts of things can interfere with children discovering their unique talents?

Be real,  
be Yourself,  
Be unique,  
be True,  
Be honest,  
be Humble,  
**Be happy.**



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### Challenges to Implementing this Possibility Include:

- a. Parents, coaches, and teachers may be critical of this idea, feeling that encouraging self-esteem is akin to “everyone getting a trophy.” Not everyone is good at everything!
  - b. Parents may encourage their children to follow the dreams they set for them, thereby blocking their children from pursuing their own interests. For example, Johnny wants to be an artist, but his mother or father wants him to play football.
  - c. There are many things that can distract young people from pursuing their talents—for instance, TV and other passive media, video games, drug use, etc. (That said, some children find great artistic motivation from media and video-gaming, which can drive them toward developing talents—even into careers.)
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## Potential Consequences

1. Children could become self-absorbed and/or develop an overly inflated sense of self. Too much praise, especially for something at which a child doesn't truly excel, could develop a false sense of confidence that, when breached, could be devastating.
2. If programs are too expensive for some areas to sustain, the socio-economic divide could widen.
3. Encouraging kids to focus on their talents earlier could result in some getting stuck on a track that doesn't suit them as they mature.
4. There could be more equitable valuation of a wider range of skills and abilities by society.
5. Parenting could become more stressful as parents try to enable their children's involvement in several extra-curricular activities. (This could also be stressful for kids!)
6. Kids will learn not to quit but rather develop new competencies through perseverance.
7. As parents and children become honest about their individual strengths and abilities, kids will be able to better accept themselves.
8. Drug use, teen pregnancy, and other social problems could be averted.
9. Children may become confident enough to better stand up for themselves.

## Further Resources

- a. The Self-Esteem Institute: <http://www.getesteem.com>
  - b. The Dove Campaign for Real Beauty: <http://www.dove.us/social-mission/campaign-for-real-beauty.aspx>
  - c. *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* by Naomi Wolf
  - d. It Gets Better! Project: <http://www.itgetsbetter.org>
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## Embrace The "Curious George" Community Model By Creating More Opportunities For Life And Skill Mentoring Within Communities.

We seem to have lost a lot of the informal mentoring that used to happen when kids interacted with a wider range of adults in their communities. In the Curious George series, these sorts of interactions were routine—George learned how to make maple syrup from the farmer and how to make gnocchi from the chef, and George's friends learned hiking and sand-castle building skills from the Man with the Yellow Hat.

We could introduce children to career options sooner by broadening the sorts of career training and education options available to young people via mentoring. How can we engage community elders to share their experience and talents with young people? Many young people have terrific skills with which they could make a living. However, too often, they do not realize that the skills and interests they already have could be turned into employable work skills.

We need to do more to help young people of all backgrounds and talents identify and hone their interests and capacities by helping more adults realize that they can be invaluable mentors, and then allowing them to serve in this role. As a nation, we prosper when all young people are honing their capacities into employable skills. Allowing more adults to serve as mentors can reinforce the goal of creating a productive citizenry.



### What's Behind It?

Coaches, scouting leaders, music teachers and others routinely pass this sort of training on to young people, and, in the process, convey a great many life skills. There needs to be a much broader engagement of people who could mentor kids in all manner of things—everything from how to build a solar go-kart to how to plan and grow a garden. Some people worry so much about pedophiles, "stranger danger," and child safety that we have created a society in which many kids cannot easily learn skills beyond those that can be taught in a formal classroom setting or at a camp. Boys, especially, may benefit from active, hands-on mentoring.

## How might this possibility be implemented?

We could find new ways to engage senior citizens in sharing their talents and experiences with young people who have similar interests. This might also help diminish the too-frequent complaints heard about “kids today” (a refrain seemingly echoed in every era!).

When a child or parent needs special help, technology could be used to assist teachers and counselors in directing parents to useful resources. Extended family could also help monitor and direct children’s socialization via social media forums such as Facebook. Families and communities could have “go-to” resident experts who could help children develop skills (computers, college access, gardening, etc.).

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### Discussion Questions:

1. If you are a parent, please share an experience of accidental mentoring that your child received.
2. What is good mentoring and how do we create opportunities for children to have mentors?
3. Does the way we live (residential zoning and single-family housing) run counter to this possibility? In what sorts of ways? How could we change that?



### Challenges to Implementing This Possibility Include:

- a. It may be challenging to find people who are willing to mentor young people. Efforts would need to be made to help people realize that they have useful skills to share—and to connect mentors with potential mentees.
  - b. Fear of others has been fed by news coverage, insurance ads, and home security services. Can we teach children and adults to be cautious of strangers but not afraid of them in order to create opportunities for informal mentoring? As a result, could men especially step up to mentor young people? Currently, many men feel like they might be viewed as “suspect” if they want to work with kids.
  - c. More creativity may need to be exercised in rural areas where it may be more difficult for mentors and mentees to find each other. Similar efforts may be needed to ensure that lower-income children also have access to such mentoring.
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## Potential Consequences

1. Children could be exposed to a greater population of mentors and learn more skill building.
2. It may be easier to ask tough questions of adults whom a child knows in an informal way. The advice that child might get could be more diverse and expansive.
3. Children may feel more empowered and self-confident as they engage a wider world and develop new skills.
4. Poorer children may be left out by a lack of technology, neighborhood violence, or minimal transportation in rural settings.
5. Parents may worry that they cannot monitor and guide their children in fast-changing online settings.
6. Children may be accidentally exposed to danger.
7. The gap between generations could lessen.

## Further Resources

- a. *The Gift of Fear* by Gavin de Becker suggests ways that parents can help children become more aware of and trust their intuition about adults who seem badly intentioned, while feeling more confident in trusting those adults that are well-meaning.
- b. The IF Guidebook: Towns and Cities



## Section III: Expanding Kids' Ideas About The World And The Place They Might Have In It



Our country—and the world more broadly—is becoming much smaller. As a result, children are being raised in a much more diverse and interesting world. Modern media exposes them to a wider range of people, cultures, and ideas, and this can provide a safe means for them to broaden their experiential base. It is important that such depictions are realistic—and that the adults in children's lives avoid handing down perspective-narrowing biases.



The 21st Century Will Emphasize Collaboration And Strong Social Skills. Our Classrooms Should Do The Same.



The 21st-century classroom should emphasize collaborative teaching and learning. We need to consider revising the educational norms so that collaborative learning is the norm. Children have plenty of (instant) access to information, but still we emphasize standardized learning. Young people can feel like they are “experts” just from reading the Google results to a particular question. They need to become more practiced at judging and assessing information. This is a skill

that extends from deliberative discussion. Think about it: you’re doing it right now, in your IF discussion. Would this be a good way for young people to explore ideas? We could train teachers to manage collaborative learning—especially group dynamics (the potential for conflict, power relationships, race/class/gender and their impact on interaction, etc.). Essentially, teachers could learn to become facilitators of learning rather than conveyors of information.

## What's Behind It?

The modern workplace has changed dramatically in just the last decade. Information is abundant, and yet the capacity of people to organize effective meetings, manage the distribution of relevant information, and deliver meaningful results has not kept up with the avalanche of information that enters people’s inboxes daily. Increasingly, one’s skill at interpreting others’ intentions, appreciating colleagues’ efforts and talents, and creating buy-in among a diverse group of players determines whether one is effective and successful in today’s workplace. It is crucial, then, that young people learn more than just “book smarts.” They must also learn how to effectively understand and work with others.

## How might this possibility be implemented?

Schools might need to be redesigned and re-envisioned to create spaces that promote interaction and allow teachers to effectively observe and guide students in their social interactions. Field trips and partnerships with third-party organizations could extend group-based learning by helping introduce students to the “real world,” making it more clear to them the applied uses of what they are learning in the classroom. Students might not pursue such learning individually but may be emboldened through a group outing.

Technology makes it more possible to interact in virtual spaces with other students from around the country—and even from around the world. Children used to have to wait weeks to hear from a “pen pal” on the other side of the planet. Now, they can Skype virtually anywhere. This technology could broaden the kinds of conversations students have.

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### Discussion Questions:

1. Should collaborative teaching be the new norm in the classroom? Why or why not? What would be some advantages and disadvantages of promoting this approach?
2. How could classrooms be redesigned to promote interaction among students?
3. Should we de-emphasize, or even eliminate, standardized testing and shift the teaching focus to judging and assessing information? What might be some advantages and disadvantages of moving away from standardized testing?
4. What role might technology play in this type of classroom?



### Challenges to Implementing This Possibility Include:

- a. Some students may become “free riders” in small groups—not understanding how to make their ideas heard and thus disengaging from the group. This could allow more dominant members of the group to feel like they are being left to do all the work. Both the “free riders” and the children who are more shy may have to adopt a modified disposition, as will children who are more assertive.
  - b. Teachers will need to learn new pedagogies and roles to make these sorts of classrooms work.
  - c. Classrooms will need to better integrate technology so that information is easy to obtain and students can focus on problem solving and creative solutions.
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## Potential Consequences

1. This approach may better prepare kids for success in the modern world.
2. Communication skills will improve.
3. Students could benefit from peer interaction. Peers can sometimes better explain a concept than a teacher, and one's own learning benefits immensely when one must explain an idea to someone else.
4. This approach could revolutionize education and propel the United States into top-performer status.
5. Schools with fewer resources may fall even further behind.
6. Businesses may partner with schools to improve the effectiveness of those schools.
7. A range of backgrounds and perspectives will be integrated into creative solutions via interaction.

## Further Resources

- a. The Case for Soft Skills Training:  
[http://www.monarchmedia.com/enewsletter\\_2012-2/case-for-soft-skills.html](http://www.monarchmedia.com/enewsletter_2012-2/case-for-soft-skills.html)
  - b. Interesting Quiz about Soft Skills: <http://www.peggyklaus.com/books/the-hard-truth-about-soft-skills/take-quiz-now>
  - c. The IF Guidebook: *K-12 Schools, The Future of Higher Education, and Helping America Talk.*
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## Encourage Children To Explore And Embrace The Diversity Of People Who Live In Our Country And In A Much More Accessible World.

It has become increasingly important to help parents, educators, and others get beyond racial, ethnic, socio-economic, and homophobic biases so that kids of all races, backgrounds, and genders can really get to know one another. Young people do not arrive on the planet with these kinds of biases; we teach them these concepts. By age 4, children will begin to distinguish themselves by skin color, but to them, this is simple description. Adults add the cultural context. Many feel as though we have transcended such biases. We have a black president now, so haven't we finally overcome our history of discrimination?

If we can find ways to promote real personal interaction and true exploration that gets beyond ideas of what's "ok" or "not ok" to say around "others," we would go a long way toward extending civil rights gains that have been made over the course of the second half of the 20th century. Exposing kids to toys, field trips, books, and other media that help them gain a cross-cultural point of view seems valuable but does not remain without controversy.

### What's Behind It?

Today, the United States is at its most diverse. It has transcended its melting pot roots to become a mosaic of cultures and people. As laws are amended to enforce equality for all Americans, so must the psyche of its citizenry evolve. Bigotry and biases are ideas that are



passed on to impressionable children by parents and caregivers whose minds were formed in a bygone era. This possibility recognizes that there is no place for biased thinking in the 21st-century economy or society.

New research by Mahzarin Banaji, a renowned Harvard University psychologist and brain researcher, suggests that children who are exposed to racism tend to accept and embrace it from as young as age 3. However, after the age of 10, their environment plays a tremendous role in how they perceive others. So, if a child is exposed to other cultures and types of people, he or she will learn to embrace others equally.

## How might this possibility be implemented?

We could enlist churches and other community centers to explore how one's words and actions can pass along bad social habits to their kids. For instance, without even thinking about it, one might pass a person panhandling on the side of the road and mutter, "Oh, get a job!" A child hearing that might make all sorts of inferences about how that person should be regarded and treated— inferences that violate many of the values we may be trying to teach the child. An emphasis could be placed upon helping people think more about how we learn and pass on values such as compassion, respect, courtesy, and fairness.

Instead of emphasizing political correctness, we might work harder to create spaces for facilitated, meaningful dialogue. The more we try not to offend, the less we seem to get to know and appreciate one another. Local, statewide, and regional gatherings could bring together students to focus on topical subjects while being immersed in a diverse group. For example, there could be a space exploration workshop that could involve students from several schools representing varied demographics.

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## Discussion Questions: What Would You Do?

1. Imagine that you've arrived with your children at a play area in a mall not far from your home. There are about a dozen kids playing when you arrive. As your children run gleefully into the play area to explore the equipment and activities and to meet new friends, you sit down with your husband to keep an eye on your kids. As you sit watching, you notice one of your kids (who are black) talking with a white child. A moment or two later, that child's parent comes over to tell the child it is time to go. You then notice that several other parents are leaving, and it occurs to you that your kids are the only non-white children in the play area. You notice that your other child is playing with another of the white children, and again you observe that child being shuttled off by her parents. Before long, you are the only family in the play area. What do you tell your children? What do you imagine the white parents told their children? Do you think the children (white or black) noticed the dynamic?

## Discussion Questions: What Would You Do?

2. Your child (age 7) is best friends with your next door neighbor's child (also 7). They go to school together, attend Brownie meetings together, and spend lots of free time with each other. You and your neighbor often walk together to the girls' bus stop. While there, you both talk with all the other parents in the neighborhood. You and your neighbor are both very friendly, outgoing people, but you find it odd that she is often invited to go to lunch outings with the other moms from the bus stop while you've never been invited along. It also seems odd that you've never had your neighbor and her family over for dinner—or vice-versa—despite your daughters being best friends. You are black and your neighbor is white. What would you make of these dynamics? What would you imagine is preventing the neighborhood moms (all of whom are also white) from inviting you along on their outings? Why do you suspect you've not sat down for a meal together with your neighbor? Most social researchers suggest that the best way to overcome deeply rooted biases is to spend time doing everyday activities with the "other" group. But very few Americans report—even in 2014—that they've ever had people of another race or ethnicity over to their homes for a meal. Why do you think this is? Do you think that the girls in this story notice that their families have never gotten together, despite their close friendship? How could we encourage more people to start breaking bread in their dining rooms with neighbors who seem "different"?
  3. Would it surprise you to know that both of the above scenarios really happened to panelists in the groups that developed this report? The woman who experienced the second scenario lives in one of the most intentionally diverse communities in the country. People there genuinely have good intentions regarding diversity and would forcefully assert that they are not biased. And they likely are not, but yet they still behave in ways that can make people outside of their group feel excluded. Are there ways to make people more aware of what are often very subtle, unconscious behaviors?
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## Challenges to Implementing This Possibility Include:

- a. Some parents will resist this possibility simply because they feel like others are telling them how to parent. It is in many people's nature to reject any changes they feel are thrust upon them. How can we find ways to invite participation?
- b. Attempting to honor individual cultures while emphasizing diversity is a difficult task, and one approach will not work in all environments.
- c. People could be reticent or resistant to participating in discussions or "growth opportunities" in the community. More creativity may be needed to find ways to imagine ways of promoting interaction and dialogue in a manner that does not feel socially "engineered."

## Potential Consequences

1. More opportunities for discussion without judgment or negative consequences may arise.
2. More diversity in thinking, discussion, and public policy will emerge.
3. There could be a loss of cultural identity and/or traditions.
4. It could become harder to define oneself. Will it be harder to define "self" in a more diverse world?
5. People may become more apt to hide their intolerant ways.
6. There could be fewer hate crimes.
7. Citizens could break down cultural barriers through improved communication across perceived cultural boundaries.

## Further Resources

- a. Learn more about Mahzarin Banaji's research: [http://www.boston.com/jobs/news/articles/2012/06/10/harvard\\_researcher\\_says\\_children\\_learn\\_racism\\_quickly/](http://www.boston.com/jobs/news/articles/2012/06/10/harvard_researcher_says_children_learn_racism_quickly/)
  - b. W.K. Kellogg Foundation Mission on Racial Equality: <http://www.wkkf.org/what-we-support/racial-equity.aspx>
  - c. The Human Rights Campaign: <http://www.hrc.org>
  - d. The IF Guidebook: *Future Possibilities for Civil Rights Policies*
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# Other Publications of the Interactivity Foundation

## Discussion Guides

- Shaping Our Towns and Cities (2013)
- Crime and Punishment (2013)
- The Future of the Family (2013)
- The Future of the Arts & Society (2013)\*
- The Human Impact on Climate Change (2013)
  - Human Migration (2013)
  - Helping America Talk (rev. 2012)\*
  - The Future of Higher Education (2012)
- The United States' Democratic Promise (2011)\*
  - The Future of Energy (2011)
- Helping Out: Humanitarian Policy for Global Security (2011)\*
  - Democratic Nation Building (2011)
  - Future Possibilities for Civil Rights Policy (2011)\*
    - The Future of K-12 Education (2011)\*
    - Food: What Might Be For Dinner (2011)\*
- Health Care: The Case of Depression (3rd ed. 2010)
  - Privacy & Privacy Rights (2nd ed. 2010)
    - How Will We All Retire? (2010)
- Anticipating Human Genetic Technology (2009)
  - The Future of Regulation (2009)
    - Property (2009)
    - Science (2009)
  - Rewarding Work (2009)

\* Also available in Spanish

## Other IF Publications

- Let's Talk Politics: Restoring Civility Through Exploratory Discussion (2013)
- Julius "Jay" Stern: A Biography (2010)
- Contrasting Possibilities and the Interactivity Foundation Discussion Process (2nd ed. 2009)
- Facilitation Guidebook for Small Group Citizen Discussions (2nd ed. 2009)
  - Support Materials for the IF Discussion Process (2009)
    - Teaching Tips (2009)
- Guidebook for Student-Centered Classroom Discussions (2008)
- Public Discussion as the Exploration and Development of Contrasting Conceptual Possibilities (2008)
- Facilitation Guidebook (2005)

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